

CONNECTICUT COMMENT

a page of opinion by Connecticut writers for Connecticut readers

Trying to spread the Democrats' message

By John Larson

How often I hear from my constituents, "Why aren't the Democrats speaking out?" I read and listen in frustration to pundits and the talking heads who suggest the Democrats have no plan and no ideas.

While I understand why this perception might exist, I think the nation and the people I represent need to know — to borrow a Paul Harvey line — "the rest of the story."

Let's be clear: Washington, D.C., is a one-party town. Republicans have controlled the House for over a decade; they control the Senate, the presidency, all the agencies that come with the executive branch, and they are in the process of tightening their ideological grip on the Supreme Court. Republicans dominate the Beltway and all three branches of government.

The administration and its operatives label those who question its policies as unpatriotic while the Republican-dominated Congress stifles oversight and independent review. Yet, as daunting a task as it can be getting your message out in this Republican-controlled town, that's only part of the impediment Democrats face. We also face the Republican message machine which dwarfs its Democratic counterpart — said with a certain organizational and message envy.

The Republican message machine is broad and deep, synchronized and coordinated; its sound-bite assaults on liberal and moderate ideals and those who support them reach far beyond the Beltway. As Harper's Magazine editor Lewis Lapham writes, in 1964 polls showed that 62 percent of respondents trusted government to do the right thing but by 1994 only 19 percent did. These poll results can be taken as tribute to the success of the Republican propaganda mill that grinds out news that all government is bad and the word "public" in all its uses and declamations (public service, public health, public parks, public education, etc.) connotes inefficiency and waste.

Well, I came of age politically when John Kennedy was president, and the view he articulated for government and cit-

izen responsibility was inspiring and uplifting, not demeaning and ineffective.

The Republican assault is coordinated by foundations such as the Bradley Foundation, the Scaife family, and the John M. Olin Foundation, and think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and the Hoover Institution. The agenda is further served by an all-media offensive that encompasses Pat Robertson, the 700 Club, Fox News Channel, Rush Limbaugh, Cal Thomas, the Washington Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Drudge Report, and myriad blogs. Most recently, this machine was put in motion to sell the president's "Ownership Society," whose real agenda is the destruction of the "liberal" ideals of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

In the face of this large behemoth of conservative-speak stand the Democrats. Will Rogers said it best: "I'm not a member of any organized political party. I'm a Democrat." This untidy, multicultural, diverse group of legislators remains committed to the ideas of Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Johnson.

Under the leadership of Nancy Pelosi, House Democrats have successfully defended Social Security and Medicare. This goes to show that, as coaches are apt to say, "Sometimes the best offense is a good defense." Given our minority position in Congress, where even germane amendments are routinely struck down by heavy-handed Republican leadership, defense is the logical strategy. Pelosi has united Democrats in defense of the people's programs more so than at any other time since former House Speaker Sam Rayburn.

The defense of Social Security against the Republican privatization juggernaut is a prime example of this strategy. It has required eternal vigilance and grassroots mobilization. Seniors have mobilized behind this fight and to date have succeeded, only to be confronted with the quandary over the Medicare Part D prescription drug program. It's clear that the Republican-dominated House and Senate serve not their constituents but corporations who want the best of both sides of

the accounting ledger: privatized profits and socialized losses.

Two things stand in the way: Pelosi and her Democratic colleagues and the outcry of everyday citizens in the 2006 elections. Together, America can do better. That's why Democrats are playing defense and fighting back the privatization onslaught. But even a good defense has to score to win; and given the chance at the ballot box, Democrats will.

In the first 100 days of a Democratic majority after the 2006 election, we will pass a prescription drug bill that provides seniors with the same type of prescription drug benefits as the Department of Veterans Affairs does. We will develop an Apollo Plan for energy independence focusing on alternative fuels, which will be centered around fuel cells. We will rebuild and protect national security at home by investing at least as much in American infrastructure and jobs as we have in Iraq. We will honor the service of veterans by funding their benefits earned in the service of their country. We will create a plan to increase savings and provide incentives outside of Social Security for 401(k)s, IRAs, and other financial instruments. We will be committed to accountability, reducing the deficit, and a pay-as-you-go policy as opposed to the borrow-and-spend legacy of the Bush administration that has saddled our children and every American with more than \$26,000 in debt.

For now, against a Republican monopoly, there is little prospect of our ideas being heard on the floor. When countering a formidable opponent that controls all branches of government, is well financed, and uniformly and ideologically networked across the board, the best offense is a good defense.

Democrats will continue to defend the people's programs. More importantly, when our ideas are heard over the din of the Republican message machine, Americans will hear a view of government and citizenship that is inspiring, not damaging.

John Larson represents Connecticut's 1st congressional district.